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Title:Time Suspended: The Problematics of Historiography in the Fairy Tale Collections of Colonial Bengal

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Synopsis

In an attempt to erase the "pathos of historicality" and in a desperate need to resist the aggression of "historiography", Tagore, towards the end of his life, had turned to the "everyday" in literature. At the very outset I differentiate historiography from historicality. And in this context I shall be using the two terms in the sense Ranajit Guha has used in his book *History at the Limits of World History*. This "everyday", Guha explains, is a peculiar phenomenon in time; its temporality cannot be identified with any particular day in calendar. Yet this everyday does not claim to be apolitical because it is essentially an experience in time in which all our 'yesterdays' remain enmeshed. The everyday is already past yet it is very much present (92). But it is only the artist who can save the everyday from succumbing to the dangers of monotony and uniformity; by informing it with creativity s/he can also make it capable of providing an altogether different version of history. Tagore himself refers to his *Galpoguccha* as a creative exercise in historicality which talks about the little weal and woes of common people as opposed to any great political, historical event in his essay "Sahitye Aitihasikata" (99). Therefore *Galpoguccha* remains to be the ultimate critique of historiography.

Modernity, as the Western Enlightenment discourse would have it, is centrally defined by the dominance of the historical. What interests me is the fact that the 19th century Bengal was marked by numerous literary and cultural endeavors thatintervened into the historical power of time and gave a call to come back to the margins of world-history "to recover their past by means of an Indian historiography of India" (Guha 1). Tagore, an ardent critic of the historical time narrated in western historiographies, took a leading role in this regard. His insistence on "recovering" and "renarrating" the "tales" of Bengal was only a part of this larger project. And it is impossible here not to talk about a young man, who, on the request of Tagore, travelled to the distant parts of Eastern Bengal to collect the "stories" of Bengal in and around 1906. The travel resulted in the publication of the legendary *Thakurmar Jhuli* in 1907. Dakshinaranjan, writes Sibaji Bandopadhyay, in travelling from Mymansingha to Calcutta, was not only covering a geographical distance but was actually taking leap from the narrator to the writer, from the listener to the reader, from one cultural milieu to another (66). The comment deserves special

attention and I shall return to it in connection to my discussion of Time in contemporary Bengali collections of fairy tales.

I shall try to read this particular politics of time into the late nineteenth, early twentieth century editions of Bengali folk and fairytales. The question needs to be addressed why this particular age was marked by a peculiar urgency to collect and edit the folktales of Bengal. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli* was preceded by Rev. Lal Behari Dey's collection *The Folktales of Bengal* (1884) and it was followed by Dinesh Chandra Sen's *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (1920). I would be arguing that folktales (with a special emphasis on fairy tales) is that safe genre in which non-contemporaneous times and beings can be accommodated without having to answer any charge of incongruity or explain any absurdity, something not possible within the realist mode of narration. This is the narrative of wonder that displaces the actual in favor of the possible and projects historicality beyond the bounds of historiography.

It would be a valid point of departure to address the overlappings of terms like myth, folklore and fairytales and the resulting confusions from them in furthering my argument. The astonishing similarities of the plots and structures of stories included in Dakshinaranjan's and Lalbehari's collections under different titles respectively fairytales and folktales compel me to go deeper into the definitions of these terms. (E.g. The same story of 'Rupmala' of *Thakumar jhuli* is called 'Fakirchand' in the *Folktales of Bengal*.) Despite a lot of terminological fluctuations, eminent scholars like Jack Zipes have agreed that myth is anterior to both folktales and fairytales (*Fairytale* 1-2). This is important for us because we are also looking at a time when the "tales" of Bengal came under a written form. And it is only natural that these writers were well aware of each other's works. How far they influenced each other or followed each other's versions is a question that is central to my thesis. Here Dinesh Chandra Sen deserves special mention for not only he comes last of the three but also because he continuously talks about the standardization and canonization of Bengali Folk Literature into contemporary academia (xiv-v). The appropriation of the oral by the written or the scholarly has not been an easy one. Unlike the oral tradition the literary tale was written down to be read in private. This privatization violated the communal aspects of folktales in more than one ways. It not only created distance between the narrator and his audience but also gave way to a separation of classes. The authorial signature of the fairytale collections not only did away with the anonymity of the erstwhile speakers of the tales but also left a definite mark on the class character of its audience. Literacy was a privilege afforded only by a few. So the birth of fairytales furthered notions of elitism and complicated issues of production and reception.

The pertinent question here is that was this very model of fairytales already available to Indians or Bengalis prior to colonial invasion. Or was it a genre that was invented to suit the demands of the time needs to be asked. So the question remains how far people like Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, Rev. Lal Behari Dey and Dinesh Chandra Sen can make a claim to originality while choosing this particular genre of fairy tale in 'inventing' a tradition or an authentic past for India.In stories after stories citable from all the three collections what is noticeable is how the primary initiation of action is done through a suspension / deferral of the present. The separation or absence is due to the evil workings of some distant relative. I read the separation as deferral in time- a moving away from the point of origin. The years of the child's

growth remain inaccessible to the parents. Away from parents, they are no longer children. There is also a strong suggestion that he/she in fact forgets about them. Among the parents, the father is in a less privileged position that the mother in terms of his control over time. Mothers, in the stories, fall into two categories- real or good mothers are in half possession of knowledge; at least know that their children are in danger and are victimized by the evil queens; but in no way capable controlling future events. The second category comprises of evil queens/step mothers/rakshasis. They are the ones who are in full possession of the present- controlling its events. The pattern is typical and recurring. The human in fighting the rakshas or kokhakhas have two points in time to fall back upon- the past and future. The present is stolen by world-history and so is the childhood of our princes and princesses. Though they crowd the world of our children's imagination they are miserably grown up people. The folktale collections of our interest are also heavily implicated in this politics of absence and presence. In talking about a lost time they try to figure a time that is yet to come, erasing the time that is at hands. Unfortunately, both the past and the future remain outside the scope of the narrative- unknown and open to changes.

So, everyone is made to "wait" till the end. Wasn't Tagore praising Dakshinaranjan for bringing this "lost" world to the urban Bengali middle classes while writing the Preface to *Thakurmar Jhuli*? The Preface ends by envisioning a future where mothers and grandmothers of Bengal would be retelling the tales to the little ones that they have heard as children and thereby signaling the end of the cultural oblivion that engulfs the nation celebrating the intellectual freedom resulting from it (xiii). An important inversion is at work here- from the demand of the listener as is the case with traditional "stories", it is now the initiative of the narrator turned speaker that gives birth to the stories. The Thakuma, grandma is asked to be trained in such a way as she could instill interest in the children to listen to stories. One can imagine how great the shift has been! There is also a mark of the anxiety of authenticity where Tagore insists that the tales of the "modern" grandmothers must follow the example of Dakshinaranjan's book. Traditional stories though moved in cycles (the listener turning into the speaker) it was never re-production; but always re-narration and re-perception. Re-production presupposes the existence of an original. Since stories exist without any authorial signature they always remain open to variations. With the re-introduction of the indigenous Bengali tales to the urban audience the scope of the stories became limited. To me the late nineteenth and early twentieth collections of Bengali folktales speak of a narrative of inclusion and exclusion where it needs to be asked where do the people, whose tales are being "brought" in large bags, and 'transistors' and then repackaged, stand in this narrative. If the time of the colonizer differs from that of the colonized; does the colonized inhabit one singular timeframe or there are internal breakages too?

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